

THE FIRST AUTOPSY IN THE NEW WORLD

FIDELIO A. JIMENEZ, M.D.

Chief, Laboratory Service
Veterans Administration Hospital
Department of Pathology
State University of New York Downstate Medical Center
Brooklyn, New York

THE first postmortem examination on the American continent was performed in Hispaniola in 1533 and recorded by Fernandez de Oviedo in his *General and Natural History of the Indies*.¹ (The postmortem examination of Phillip Rougemont, a member of Jacques Cartier's expedition in Canada was performed approximately two and a half years later, in February 1536.² Oviedo's report begins with a short introduction to the subject of monsters and quotes a report of 1314 by the Bishop of Florence concerning a two-headed boy who was taken to Sancta Maria de la Escala in Florence where he died 20 days later. The author felt that because such a monster was reported by a bishop it would be correct and ecclesiastically appropriate for him to report another monstrosity. His description is as follows:

I said that in this city of Santo Domingo in the island of Hispaniola on Thursday night, July 10, 1533; Melchiora, wife of Joan Lopez Ballestero, both natural [natives] of Seville but now residing in this city, delivered two daughters attached to each other in the manner that I shall describe later. On the following day, myself and a number of witnesses that included members of the justice and the church, as well as many neighbors, strangers, and other people that were staying in the city visited the home of Joan. The mother was in bed and in the presence of her husband, the children were unwrapped and once naked I saw that they were attached at the level of the umbilicus to just below the nipples. They were united from the umbilicus to the stomach or a little bit higher, but the breasts and nipples and everything else above these structures were separate. Each child had two arms, one neck and a well shaped and attractive head. They were completely separated from the umbilicus down and were joined not facing each other but rather at an angle. On being unwrapped, both began to cry, and later when covered again one stopped crying but the other continued for a spell. The father stated that soon after birth they were baptized. One was named Joana and the other Melchiora. The priest stated that he baptized both separately as a matter of

precaution since he was not sure whether they actually represented two bodies and two souls or only one.

The girls died eight days after birth. The description continues:

The parents consented to have them cut open. Placed on a table; Joan Camacho who held a Bachelor's Degree and was an excellent surgeon made an incision with a knife in the presence of two doctors of medicine: Hernando de Sepulveda and Rodrigo Navarro. The incision was made through the umbilicus and both bodies were eviscerated. They had the full complement of entrails to be found in two human bodies, to wit: two stomachs with their corresponding separate intestines and two kidneys, two lungs and one heart in each set of viscera. The livers were not separate but fused to each other, however, there was a groove that outlined the part of the fused livers that belonged to each body. There were two gallbladders. When opened, the umbilicus or vine, that externally appeared single, internally was divided into two vines, one for each body. When asked if the creatures while alive showed any differences in feeding habits or other activities, the father answered that sometimes one cried while the other was silent. This I observed the first time I saw them and so did the other witnesses. He added that at times one was asleep while the other was awake, and that while one defecated or urinated the other did none of the above. However, occasionally they will do these functions simultaneously, at times one would anticipate the other. This will prove, even without having them cut open, that they were two separate persons and two souls. Thus Joana and Melchiora left this world for the Celestial Glory where it pleases our Lord that we should see them.

The detailed description of the liver or livers and the notation that there were two gallbladders probably reflects acceptance of Empedocle's doctrine that the seat of the soul was in the liver.

I have been unable to trace the documentation purported to explain the elaborate description of the postmortem findings in this case and the pains taken by Oviedo to prove that there indeed were two souls and not one. The quoted version of this incident is that the father of the twins, unhappy to have sired a monster, was less than willing to pay for the two baptisms administered by the priest, protesting that a single soul would do for the two bodies inasmuch as they were united.

REFERENCES

1. De Oviedo, F.: *Historia General y Natural de las Indias*. Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 1959, tome CXVII, vol. 1, chap. 11, pp. 170-72.
2. Jacques Cartier et La Gross Maladie. XIX Int. Congress of Physiology, Montreal. Montreal, Ronalds, 1953.